New York
Theatre Critics' Reviews
1950

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK POST HOME NEWS
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"Happy as Larry"

New York World-Telegram
The Sun

January 7, 1950

Fantasy Runs Riot In 'Happy as Larry'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Low speed is the most consistent characteristic of "Happy as Larry," last night's new musical at the Coronet Theater. Sometimes the casual pace lends a fireside air to the tale-telling. More often it means a decided lack of vitality.

The show might fairly be called a surrealist fantasy, since so many of the elements brought together in it have no recognizable or logical relation to each other. The setting is "anywhere, anytime," but the author's name, Donagh MacDonagh, the vocabulary, and the mythical character of the story are distinctly Irish.

The Larry of the title is a tailor who starts telling his fellows about his grandfather, also Larry, who married twice and never knew which of his wives was good and which was bad. To tell the story, young Larry becomes his grandfather, who with an eye for beauty, brings home a lovely widow on the day the town doctor has planned to poison him in order to win his wife.

Stabbing Brings Life.

Furious at this behavior, young Larry's assembled tailor friends call on the fates to transport them back to the grandfather's time. They manage to poison the doctor, and to save him, Mrs. Larry stabs her freshly dead husband to get blood for a transfusion.

The stabbing brings Larry back to life, which kills his widow from shock. Almost immediately Larry is spoken for anew by the beautiful widow.

The play is not poetic, but it rhymes. At the drop of a hat it is sung, and the music is a strange combination of modern and trite. Sometimes the orchestrations are provocative, and other times they sound like someone trying to remember Prokofieff, and playing on accordion, kazoo and kitchen spoons.

Singing Is Good.

Burgess Meredith clearly suits the central character, and enjoys playing it. He is quizzical, sage, tousle-headed and carelessly dressed. On stage he gives the tale a focus it sadly lacks without him. He also uses an extremely mellow and intelligently projected singing voice, giving the show its chance of a hit in "I Remember Her."

Marguerite Piazza makes a luscious widow and sings beautifully, drawing particular attention to an air called "October." Barbara Perry is a comely wife, who makes her chief hit in her specialty with castanets. Gene Barry is a handsome doctor to pursue the ladies.

As a pharmacist Irwin Corey remains faithful to the disconcerting pomposity he has made so popular in night clubs. He manages more than anyone else in the show to suggest a distinct character, but one feels that there will be better times ahead.

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"HAPPY AS LARRY"

Musical by Donagh MacDonagh; music by Mischa and Wesley Portnoff; scenery and costumes by Motley; choreography by Anna Sokolow; staged by Burgess Meredith; musical direction by Franz Allers; orchestrations by Rudolph Goehr and Charles Cook; presented by Leonard Sillman at the Coronet Theatre, January 6, 1950. The cast:

1st Tailor.....Maurice Edwards
3d Tailor.....Frank Milton
4th Tailor.....Harry Allen
5th Tailor.....Henry Calvin
6th Tailor.....William Hogue
7th Tailor.....Jack Warner
8th Tailor.....Fin Olsen
2d Tailor.....Himself
Larry.....Burgess Meredith
The Widow..Marguerite Piazza
The Gravedigger..Ralph Hertz
Mrs. Larry....Barbara Perry
The Doctor.....Gene Barry
Seamus.....Irwin Corey
Clotho.....Mara Kim
Lachesis.....Diane Sinclair
Atropos.....Royce Wallace

Synopsis: The action of the play takes place anywhere, any time. Act I—Scene 1. A casual tailor shop. Scene 2. A restless graveyard. Scene 3. Interior, the house of Larry. Scene 4. Space. Act II—Scene 1. Exterior, the house of Larry. Scene 2. Interior, the house of Larry. Scene 3. The tailor shop.

DAILY NEWS

January 7, 1950

Buzz Does Everything in 'Happy As Larry', but Show Won't Wash

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Fantasy is a powerful drug. A little of it, properly administered, can put the patient in a state of extreme happiness—but an overdose is dangerous. I'd say that "Happy as Larry," which was presented last evening at the Coronet, is an overdose.

So, instead of feeling elated as I type this piece, I feel rather miserable and dejected. I wanted so much to like "Happy as Larry," and still want to, for it is a brave and ingenious venture on the part of Burgess Meredith and his producer, Leonard Sillman, and brave and ingenious people are precious in the theatre.

The best I can say for last evening is that some scenes and some people in the show are delightful. Other scenes and other people are so strenuously pixyish that they amount to too much. I grow dizzy with glee at one leprechaun in "Finian's Rainbow" or at one invisible rabbit named Harvey who is six feet, one and a half inches tall. But I don't want a dozen leprechauns leaping all over me or a whole litter of tall rabbits leering at me from a cluster of lamp posts. They make me nervous.

Buzz Does Everything.

Donagh MacDonagh, who is Irish, wrote "Happy as Larry" as a whimsical little play in the flowery verse of the Emerald Isle, and reports are that Dublin and London liked it. Mr. Meredith, who is becoming a veritable Orson Welles, but thinner than most Orson Welleses, fell kerplunk for this work. He thought it would be great with music and he talked it up and down this land from Amherst, Mass., to Brooklyn, Brooklyn.

Mr. Meredith acts not one, but two Larrys. He sings, in a manner of speaking. He maintains an air of grand good nature, and he plants comedy lines like the expert he is. He has directed the production, which involves magical scenery and witches. He has gathered about him a pleasant company, including Irwin Corey, a night club zany; Barbara Perry, a dancer; Gene Barry, a night club villain of the Gay Nineties type, and Marguerite Piazza, an opera singer who is handsome and rather interestingly gowned. I suppose Miss Piazza sings with her diaphragm, as all good opera people should—but to tell you the truth, I just plain forgot to look last evening, because I was bemused by the abundant generosity of her neckline.

Wildly Varied Music.

Mr. Meredith, as Larry, works in an Irish tailor shop with eight other men and they get to talking and singing about women. Meredith spins them a tale about his grandfather, and everybody is whisked back 50 years with the help of some witches and illusions to Einstein's theory of space and time. Grandfather Larry has, one at a time, two wives (Mmes. Piazza and Perry) and is murdered once but comes back to life.

As the short evening wore on, "Happy as Larry" seemed to be growing pretty desperate and confused. The music, by Mischa and Wesley Portnoff, seemed to be everything but Hibernian. Some times it was blues, and again boogie-wooge, and again violently ano grimly modern. Easiest song to listen to was Miss Piazza's "October."

It's a good try, and if you are in the market for the unusual it may be worth a visit. Or you can turn on the television and watch that program about Mr. I. Magination.

Journal American
January 9, 1950

A Phony Festival In Dubious Doggerel

By ROBERT GARLAND

Having been led to believe that there's no business like it, show business took unfair advantage of the saying last Friday at the Coronet. Not even Leonard Sillman had any right to foster so phony a festival on Broadway. Not with an unphony star such as Burgess Meredith!

Frankly, they do say it was Burgess Meredith's festival in the first place. Well, if "Happy as Larry" were a woman, I'd say Mr. Meredith was in love with her. Nobody but a man in love could become enamored of anything so second-rate and dress it up so fancy.

In "Happy as Larry"—could "happy" be a misprint for "sappy"?—Donagh MacDonagh supplied the star with two acts of meretricious mumbo-jumbo. What was worse, it was whimsical-whamsical. What was even worse, it could have been verse in which the piece was written.

But it wasn't! It was dubious doggerel in which "corner" rhymed with "informer," "known" with "gone," and, as this confounded critic can well say, "stuff" with "nonsense."

• • •

Ah, Who Cares?

Larry, of the title, was anything but happy. The ninth tailor in a shop of which he seemed to be the boss—if he weren't the boss the other eight wouldn't have urged him to keep on talking—he insisted upon telling his employes about his dead and buried granddad.

It seemed that his granddad was also known as Larry. Granddad Larry was in love with two wives. Or maybe they weren't wives, but merely women. At any rate, one sat all day in the cemetery, fanning the grave of her lost husband. She was quite a fanner!

The other sat all day at home, bursting out occasionally with song and dance. She was quite a dancer! And Larry killed himself between them. I thought he did. But I couldn't be sure, because he came back later on to remark "You want to know am I dead or living."

By that time, Friday, I didn't. Nor did the congregation. As he, himself, pointed out, whatever did happen to him wouldn't make the action of a play. It didn't!

• • •

Too Much, Too Little

Larry, plus a Gravedigger, a Doctor and a Pharmacist, who worked together, three fates called Clotho, Lachesis and Atropos, Mrs. Larry, the Widow and the eight tailors who obviously worked for Larry, made up the balance of the evening. Too much they were, and too little.

Burgess Meredith, obviously head-over-heels in love with "Happy as Larry," brought all his skill, charm and devotion to a script unworthy of them. In its Irish version, there must have been some basic merit to Donagh MacDonagh's original. It had disastrously disappeared!

Marguerite Piazza was lovely to look at and listen to as the Widow who fanned the grave. The girl's got everything! Barbara Perry was a luscious Mrs. Larry. But it was Irwin Corey who, as the Pharmacist, brought the importation fleetingly to life . . .

The music by the Portnoffs was unusual, the mobiles by the Calder were fascinating, the appearance of the Meredith was picaresque and "Happy as Larry" was closed on Saturday.

New York Post
HOME NEWS

January 8, 1950

Mr. Meredith's Luckless Fantasy
By Richard Watts Jr.

Since Burgess Meredith gave his distinguished performance in the title role of "The Playboy of the Western World," he has been awarded a sort of squatter's rights on the Irish drama in this vicinity. It was not surprising, therefore, to see him turn up at the Coronet Theatre Friday night as director and leading actor of a Celtic fantasy called "Happy as Larry," the work of an Irish playwright named Donagh MacDonagh, with some music by a couple of non-Irish fellows known as Mischa and Wesley Portnoff. One trouble, though, is that an attempt has been made to de-nationalize the play.

It is understandable why Mr. Meredith, suspecting that he was about to be typed as a crypto-Celtic actor, wanted to take advantage of the fact that his vehicle was not on an exclusively Irish theme by proclaiming that "the action of the play takes place anywhere, anytime." Indeed, I recall that the author once told me his fable came originally from China, possibly to gratify a private suspicion of mine that the Irish and the Chinese are remarkably alike in a number of surprising and flattering ways. Nevertheless, the effort to show that "Happy as Larry" basically has no nationality doesn't work out.

Despite such efforts as soft-pedalling the Gaelic aspects and accents of the work, making its setting "anywhere, anytime," emphasizing its universal qualities and avoiding the loal actors who inevitably turn up in the Abbey-type dramas, the Irish spirit of the humor and imagination in "Happy as Larry" keeps emerging, but, unfortunately, in a dim and diluted form. My guess is that Mr. MacDonagh's fantasy would have been more satisfactory if it hadn't lost its nationality in transit, just as it is conceivable that it might have been better without the rather undistinguished Portnoff music.

One-Man Show

It is said that, when Mr. Meredith was giving "Happy as Larry" in local drawing rooms as a one-man show to interest potential backers in financing it, the result was a singularly winning theatrical tour-de-force. I can well believe it, because Burgess Meredith is one of the best and most thoroughly engaging actors on the American stage, who always invests his roles with warmth, vitality and humor, and the evening at the Coronet was much at its best when he was dominating the stage. But he is less fortunate as a director, and the fantasy bogs down sadly in the course of its current production.

Even if it were done with more skill and imagination, there is grave reason to doubt that the play would be much more than an occasionally charming essay in whimsy. There are excellent moments in it, but, on the whole, it seems pretty heavy-handed in its fantasy. The story of a meditative tailor, who, while telling his fellow craftsmen about his grandfather and his two wives, somewhow becomes that grandfather and is aided by his companions, who whirl back through time to help him in his problems of fifty years before, if has a way of becoming as confused as my summary probably indicates.

A Few Pleasures

There are a few delightful things in it. The widow who spends her time fanning her late husband's grave became she had promised him she wouldn't rewed as long as it remained damp is an oddly amusing conception. There is a wild dance by the tailor's wife before she seeks her husband's blood to save her lover's life, that has real excitement about it, and Mr. Meredith has one good song, called "I remember Her," which is charming. But, in general, the charm and the imagination fail to come off, and, when fantasies strive for charm and imagination and fail, the result can be dire.

The sets and costumes by Motley are attractive, and Anna Sokolow has staged some of the dances well. Marguerite Piazza, as the fanning widow, plays and sings expertly, and Barbara Perry, as Larry's faithless wife, gives admirable intensity to that lady's furious dance. Irwin Corey, a good night-club clown, plays a merry poisoner with an excellent sense of low comedy, but his performance remains a night-club act, rather than part of the play. It is melancholy to see so brilliant an actor as Burgess Meredith wasted so sadly.

"Happy as Larry"—*continued*

NEW YORK
Herald Tribune
January 7, 1950

By HOWARD BARNES

Handsome, but a Jape

A DAFFY and disorderly musical fantasy has brought Burgess Meredith to the Coronet Theater. "Happy as Larry" has moments of high eloquence and melodic felicity. It has too little of Meredith. When he is off stage the proceedings become unruly and frequently senseless, for all the fancy trimmings of the production. Donagh MacDonagh's fable about a tailor and his seven assistants avenging the murder of his grandfather lacks substance, wit and sustained satire. The score by Mischa and Wesley Portnoff is a strange mixture of haunting refrains and dissonant dance numbers. Since the dances themselves, designed by Anna Sokolow, have little pertinence to the plot, "Happy As Larry" is more of a curiosity than an entertainment.

* * *

It is a handsome jape. Motley has designed fetching settings and costumes for the offering and Alexander Calder's mobiles wave lazily against a blue cyclorama. Meanwhile the star has staged it with a maximum of movement, achieving something closely bordering pandemonium when the Three Fates deliver a time machine to the tailors to take them back through fifty years, or when a wake is climaxed by a murder and a rising from the dead. Undoubtedly MacDonagh, who is a circuit-riding Irish judge when he is not knocking out shows like "Happy As Larry," had some deeply significant symbolism hidden in his rhymed couplets, blank verse and lyrics. It stays well hidden. The decor and Meredith's infrequent appearances do not suffice to keep the show from growing very tedious.

* * *

It would be idle to attempt a resume of the plot. The Larry of the title is both himself and his poisoned grandpapa and for no good reason at all winds up back in his tailor establishment. He is far better as his ancestor, singing "Now and Then," or a charming song called "I Remember Her," dancing and chatting with a lonely widow and his wife. It is a role which gives Meredith immense scope and he makes the most of it. Marguerite Piazza gives him fine vocal and acting assistance as a lady who fans her husband's grave, rising to real heights in "October." Barbara Perry, as the wife, has a dizzy number, "The Loyalist Wife," which suddenly finds her rattling castanets and Gene Barry is good as the doctor who does in the original Larry.

* * *

The comic bits are scattered so indiscriminately through "Happy As Larry" that they leave long yawning periods between them. Ralph Hertz does a nice job as a grave-digger, Henry Calvin is exuberant as one of the tailors and Irwin Corey goes into brogue in a big way as the apothecary who assists the physician in his nefarious deed. The Three Fates, incidentally, engage in a frenetic piece of torso-twisting before the time machine starts operating, the meaning of which quite eluded this reporter. Most of "Happy As Larry" is elusive. Unfortunately most of it is also dull.

The New York Times
January 7, 1950

Burgess Meredith Appears in a Musical Fantasy Entitled 'Happy as Larry' at the Coronet

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since Burgess Meredith has been enthralled for a long time with "Happy as Larry," there must be something genuine in it somewhere. But on the basis of the performance at the Coronet last evening, it is impossible to share his taste. "Happy as Larry" is a fantasy about the faithlessness of women, written in monotonous doggerel, set to some pretty trying music, interrupted by some uneasy dancing and sicklied over with pretentious whimsies that amount to an ordeal.

If it gave Mr. Meredith a good part there might be some point in putting it on. But it keeps him off the stage for what seems to be more than half the evening (the character he plays being temporarily dead). When the character is alive Mr. Meredith has nothing much to work with except the coy attitudinizing of a silly fable.

* * *

As a matter of fact, Mr. Meredith is an especially valuable actor—affable, honest and simple in style. He does not take himself seriously and he has an independent mind. In the course of ordinary affairs he must have numerous opportunities to select a script and return to the stage, which will always have considerable affection for him. But "Happy as Larry" is a waste of his talent as well as a waste of his good-will, which he has generously misapplied. When it is not gross or ghoulish, it is furiously dull.

"Happy as Larry" is a fantasy by Donagh MacDonagh, with some eccentric music by Mischa and Wesley Portnoff, some dance diversions invented by Anna Sokolow, some capricious costumes and settings by Motley and a full evening of labored roguishness. As nearly as a theatregoer can tell without consulting a medium, it is the story of how a great lover is murdered by a rival, how his widow forgets him instantly, how he comes back to earth and renounces women for the rest of his life. It sounds as though it had been written by a village misogynist in love with his own archness and cleverness.

For a few moments in the second act, it does not seem to be quite so untalented as it is in the first act, though this may be only an illusion or the ultimate triumph of matter over mind. But there are a few moments when Mr. Meredith casts a rueful spell over the proceedings by acting with skill and sincerity. And there are two or three charming songs, most of them sung enchantingly by Marguerite Piazza. Also, Irwin Corey manages to be enjoyable by improvising a sprite-like character that has nothing to do with the lines.

* * *

But these are only minor consolation to the most hard-working bore of the season. To judge by "Happy As Larry," Mr. MacDonagh cannot write a play, certainly he cannot write poetry, and his sense of humor must be weird. Now that Mr. Meredith has got this foible out of his system, it would be a grand thing if he would act in a literate play.

Daily Mirror
January 7, 1950

'Happy as Larry' Isn't Any Too Happy

By ROBERT COLEMAN

"Happy as Larry" is a happy title for a rather lugubrious musical, in which Larry himself is a pretty unhappy guy. The new arrival at the Coronet Theatre is an Irish import from the atelier of Donagh MacDonagh, with a score by Mischa and Wesley Portnoff.

MacDonagh has attempted a fantasy that doesn't come off. It is arty, pretentious and rather confusing. It lacks the quality and genuine poetic depth required by such work. It is interesting primarily because of an excellent cast and an imaginative production.

A group of tailors are discussing life, women and fidelity, when one of them—Larry, by name—starts unfolding the story of his grandfather. He had loved two women and wasn't quite sure which was good and which was bad. His first wife had connived with a doctor to kill him so that they might be wed.

Then the grandson Larry becomes as one with grandpa Larry, through an Einsteinian time-conception. Whereupon his fellow tailors persuade Three Fates to send them back 50 years, so that they can kill the doctor who poisoned Larry. Larry's treacherous wife falls dead of shock when he miraculously returns to life.

So Larry finds consolation with a handsome widow whom he had found fanning her late husband's grave, because she had promised not to remarry until the earth above him was dry. There are gory, cynical details, kiddies. Pleasant dreams.

Star Burgess Meredith does as well by the hapless Larry as anyone could. He even succeeds in putting some heart and emotion into the tricky role, toward the end. But the hit of the evening—for our money—is Marguerite Piazza, as the Ephesian widow.

The tuneful Portnoff score is sung to the hilt by the principals and the musical tailors. The Hit Parade is likely to adopt a couple of the numbers.

"The Member of the Wedding"

Daily Mirror

January 6, 1950

'Member of the Wedding' Is a Stirring Hit

By ROBERT COLEMAN

In "The Member of the Wedding," Carson McCullers has created a mood rather than a well-made play, but it is a mood that held an audience spellbound in the Empire Theatre last evening. So facinated by the McCullers characterizations were first-nighters that they threw their yardsticks away and enjoyed themselves immensely.

In adapting "The Member of the Wedding" from her own novel, Miss McCullers has focused attention primarily on Frankie Addams, a lonely, frustrated hoyden in a Georgia town, and a sympathetic Negro cook who understands her somewhat abnormal behavior. Both characters are so vivid that they constantly vie for the center of attraction, which is at once one of the play's weaknesses and strengths.

Frankie is not psychopathic. She's just unusual. She has been motherless since infancy, is shunned by the nice, conventional little girls of the neighborhood, and feels all alone. When her brother returns from the army to marry, she decides to accompany the bride and groom on their honeymoon, and is shocked when she's left behind.

But by the play's end, Frankie has found a playmate and new interests. She is moving into a new house. She is verging on something resembling maturity. She has developed an interest in classical music. But the cook, who had had four husbands and loved only one of them, cannot adjust herself to new circumstances. She has served her purpose and is reconciled to it.

Julie Harris gives a magnetic performance as the temperamental Frankie. One of the best performances by a young actress in many seasons. If she failed to move us as much as she might, it was due, we suspect, to shortcomings in the script. It is a bravura performance, an acting tour de force. It won cheers from the audience.

Ethel Waters as the cook acts with tremendously effective simplicity and sincerity. Her performance, in a quieter key, complements beautifully that of Miss Harris. And there is a wonderful contribution by 7-year old Brandon De Wilde as Frankie's impish little cousin. Young Master De Wilde, who is making his first stage appearance, has the assurance and poise of a veteran.

Robert Whitehead, Oliver Rea and Stanley Martineau have a stirring hit.

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"THE MEMBER OF THE WEDDING"

Play by Carson McCullers; staged by Harold Clurman; scenery, costumes and lighting by Lester Polakov; presented by Robert Whitehead, Oliver Rea and Stanley Martineau at the Empire Theatre, January 5, 1950

The cast:

Jarvis.....James Holden
Frankie Addams..Julie Harris
Janice.....Janet De Gore
Berenice Sadie Brown.....
Ethel Waters
Royal Addams..William Hansen
John Henry West.....
.Brandon De Wilde
Mrs. West....Margaret Barker
Helen Fletcher...Mitzie Blake
Doris.....Joan Shepard
Sis Laura.....Phyllis Walker
T. T. Williams...Harry Bolden
Honey Camden Brown,...
Henry Scott
Barney McKean..Jimmy Dutton

Synopsis: A small town in Georgia in August, 1945. Act I. Friday—Late afternoon. Act II. Afternoon the following day. Act III. Scene 1. Sunday afternoon. Scene 2. Just before dawn the following morning. Scene 3. Late fall.

Journal American

January 6, 1950

Something Special But Not Quite a Play

By ROBERT GARLAND

Even when, in the middle of the evening, Carson McCullers' "The Member of the Wedding" stops trying to be a play it remains something rare and special in the theatre. But I do wish Miss McCullers had called in an expert to help her with her playmaking.

As a novelist, the author of last night's premiere at the Empire is admired for "The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter," "Reflections in a Golden Eye" and the novel from which, as a piece to be spoken out loud, for pay, in public, "The Member of the Wedding" derives.

As a playwright, she remains a novelist. She is better at telling you what happens to Frankie Addams then she is at showing you. So what should be the climax of her play, what is the climax of her novel, in no more than off-stage action talked about unseen.

And this is where Julie Harris, who is featured, and Ethel Waters, who is starred, succeed where Carson McCullers does not. Having read the book, they carry on the story of the poor little lonely girl who yearns to be a member of her soldier-brother's wedding...

They and one Master de Wilde!

* * *

Yearns to Belong

In her novel, "The Member of the Wedding," Carson McCullers tells how Frankie Addams, the loneliest twelve-year-old in Georgia, yearns to belong. She yearns to belong to something, to anything. Everybody belongs to a church, to a club, even to a wedding.

Everybody but Frankie. Frankie stays home to go into fits and starts about it. Her companions, Berenice Sadie Brown, who is what used to be an old colored mammy, and John Henry West, who is a young white next-door neighbor, do what they can to brighten up her corner.

But, as Berenice is good enough to suggest, she sho' do enjoy her misery. In an effort to enjoy it even more, she decides to become a member of her soldier-brother's wedding. She, in person, will make a crowd of three at the altar, then on the honeymoon.

Just about here, "The Member of the Wedding" as a novel and "The Member of the Wedding" as a play part company. Things begin to happen off-stage, beyond a door that will not stay shut. On-stage, the old colored mammy is alone, holding the author's story...

Frankie is in, then out, to refresh her!

* * *

Ethel's Terrific

Ethel Waters is high up among the first ladies of the American theatre. Seldom has she been more first-ladylike than she is as Berenice. Her performance is so tremendous, and so true, that, toward the end, it holds its vehicle more or less together.

As for the Frankie of Julie Harris, that is its young and showier equal. As a neurotic little girl of twelve, Miss Harris looks and is the part, more than fulfilling the great promises of "Sundown Beach," "The Young and Fair" and "Magnolia Alley."

As for Brandon de Wilde, the eight-year-old actor making his Broadway debut, he is—as the word goes—something. At the Empire, he gets his wings before he becomes an angel. James Holden is welcome back from the Hollywoods as Frankie's getting-married brother.

The Messrs. Whitehead, Rea and Martineau have given Carson McCullers' "The Member of the Wedding" a beautiful production, with settings, costumes and lighting by Lester Polakov, direction by Harold Clurman. Only Miss McCullers kind of lets them down...

It is, though, something rare and special!

The New York Times
January 6, 1950

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

If the drama were nothing but character sketches and acting, "The Member of the Wedding," which opened at The Empire last evening, would be a masterpiece. For Carson McCuller's portrait of a harum-scarum adolescent girl in Georgia is wonderfully – almost painfully—perceptive; and her associated sketches of a Negro mammy and a busy little boy are masterly pieces of writing, also.

Fortunately, they have fallen into the hands of Harold Clurman, who appreciates them. He has staged a performance by Ethel Waters, Julie Harris and young Brandon De Wilde that has incomparable insight, grace and beauty. Anyone who loves art ought to be humbly grateful for such acting and direction. Like Miss McCuller's character portraiture, they are masterly pieces of work.

* * *

Originally, "The Member of the Wedding" was a novel. That probably has some bearing on the fact that the play has no beginning, middle or end and never acquires dramatic momentum. Although Miss McCullers has taken the material out of the novel she has not quite got it into the form of a play.

What she has got is an infinitely poignant sketch of an unprepossessing adolescent girl who is looking around hungerily for human companionship and for something that she can join. The incident of the play concerns her brother's wedding. Fantasy-ridden like an overwrought adolescent, the girl plans to join it by going away with her brother and his bride and casting her lot with theirs permanently. Almost psychopathically imaginative, she foresees a very gaudy future of travel, excitement and friends.

* * *

That is about all there is to the narrative or plot to "The Member of the Wedding." The rest is character analysis—the wild, whirling impulses of a girl on tip-toe with eagerness for a world she does not know how to take part in; the lumbering, elemental compassion of the Negro cook who knows all about life; the counterpoint activities of the little boy who is busy about his own affairs and runs in and out of the play like a sprite. Miss McCuller's insight is deep and sympathetic. Her literary style is deft and spinning. Her characterizations of the chief people and her sketches of them together in a ramshackle kitchen are superb pieces of work.

The play is acted in a casually and imaginatively designed setting by Lester Polakov that lets the action spill in and out of the kitchen and through the dooryard. In the long, immensely complicated part of the adolescent girl, Julie Harris, a very gifted young actor, gives an extraordinary performance—vibrant, full of anguish and elation by turns, rumpled, unstable, egotistic and unconsciously cruel.

As the Negro cook and symbol of maternity, Miss Waters gives one of those rich and eloquent performances that lay such a deep spell on any audience that sees her. Although the character has a physical base in Miss Waters' mountainous personality, it has exalted spirt and great warmth of sympathy.

* * *

Brandon De Wilde, who is 8 years old, plays the neighborhood boy with amazing imperturbability. This is a vastly humorous part, and Brandon won all the hearts in the audience last evening, for he is resourceful and self-contained; and Mr. Clurman, who has a special gift for the parts of children and young people, has staged these interludes tactfully and amusingly.

None of the other parts is extensive or important, for Miss McCullers merely uses the other characters to fill out the character sketches. But the parts are well played, particularly by William Hansen, Harry Bolden and Henry Scott. In view of the rare quality of the writing and acting, the fact that "The Member of the Wedding" has practically no dramatic movement does not seem to be very important. It may not be a play, but it is art. That is the important thing.

DAILY NEWS
January 6, 1950

'Member of the Wedding' and Its Cast Earn Cheers at the Empire

By JOHN CHAPMAN

We still are short of water, but, thank goodness, the theatrical drout is over. A new play, "The Member of the Wedding," came to the Empire Theatre last evening, and at the fall of the third-act curtain a play-parched audience gave voice to its relief with loud, honest cheers.

I don't know what the other members of the congregation were cheering for—the play or the performances or both—but if I had had time to stay for a few moments afterward I'd have done my hollering for three fine, moving performances by Julie Harris, Ethel Waters and Brandon De Wilde. Mr. De Wilde will be 8 next April. And then I'd have remained a bit longer to give a few whoops in praise of Harold Clurman, whose staging of "The Member of the Wedding" struck me as being at least as creative, sensitive and intelligent a piece of work as was the writing of the script by Carson McCullers. The second-act curtain scene, involving the three players I have mentioned, is going to have a welcome place in my memory.

Mrs. McCullers made the drama out of her novel of the same title. As a piece of playmaking it is not ideal, for it reiterates one theme for two acts with scarcely any story or character development. Then, caught with a third and final act, it scrambles through a wedding, a storm, an offstage murder and two offstage deaths in quite a bit of a hurry.

An Absorbing Study

Ideal or not, "The Member of the Wedding" is an absorbing study of an adolescent girl, and in this role Miss Harris gives a splendid performance. This character of Frankie Addams is a queer one—a hot-tempered tomboy with an acute and painful imagination. Frankie dreams the most foolish and impossible dreams, and they are as full of heartbreak for her friends, of whom I am one, as for her poor, skinny little self. As Frankie, Miss Harris is remarkable in her sustained intensity.

This girl I've been talking about is the daughter of a modest jeweler in a small town in Georgia. Her big soldier brother has come home on leave (it is 1945) to get married. Frankie thinks she is going to be a part of the wedding—that she will go along with her brother and his bride to far, new, exciting places. As she puts it, "I've been just an 'I' person. You have to belong to a 'we.'" What she would really like to be is a member of the whole world, and not just a little girl with dirty elbows and a crew haircut.

Miss Waters' Best.

Frankie's mother died when she was born and the one who has taken care of her is a colored servant (Miss Waters). This greatly loving woman tries to tell the girl that people do not move in on weddings and that Noah had the right idea when he put the passengers on the Ark two by two. But the girl will not believe, and when she is left behind at the wedding it is heartbreaking.

Miss Waters is giving her best performance in the theatre—a piece of acting that is loving and lovable and profoundly expert. She is the one who can make Mrs. McCullers' long pages from a novel come alive. Whenever the author fails to take command of the stage, Miss Waters takes command, and it is a great pleasure to fall under the spell of her quiet authority.

The third notable member of the generally good company, Mr. De Wilde, carries great burdens with enchanting insouciance. He is the one who provides practically all of the comedy—and there is a happy lot of it—in a very emotional play. He never misses a trick and yet he remains a nice little boy without any unpleasant signs of precociousness.

There is a fine setting by Lester Polakov, and all in all "The Member of the Wedding" is good theatre.

New York Post
HOME NEWS
January 6, 1950

A Striking New American Play

By Richard Watts Jr.

Out of her much-admired novel called "The Member of the Wedding," Carson McCullers has made a sensitive, unusual and touching play of genuine individuality, which was presented at the Empire last night, with the veteran Ethel Waters, the oncoming Julie Harris and a delightful child actor named Brandon de Wilde offering notable performances in its three leading roles. Dealing with intangible qualities which are difficult to capture in the forthright commercial theatre, Miss McCullers' drama has a strange, haunting and delicate kind of rueful beauty rarely looked for on the contemporary American stage.

It must be confessed quickly that "The Member of the Wedding" is not always completely successful in its use of the dramatic form. It is a work of mood, suggestion and implication that is sometimes too vague, attenuated and indistinct for our literal theatre, and its interest seems in some respects rather more that of the novel than of the drama. But its weaknesses as a well-rounded theatrical conception are more than atoned for by its sensitivity of feeling, its delicacy of treatment, and its understanding warmth of human sympathy. There is quality in both its prose style and its compassionate viewpoint.

The Need to Belong

Its mood is more narrative than dramatic and what it has to say may seem very slight when set down briefly in a review. It is merely the story of twelve-year-old Frankie Adams, a gawky, sensitive and bewildered little girl, who is just becoming aware of the life that is sprawling about her. Her beloved brother is going to marry a nice young neighbor, and the child feels that she is being left out of things, that, while others can say "we," she can only say "I," and that she can belong in the world if she can become a member of the wedding party and go off with the bride and groom.

She is heart-broken and hysterical when she is not allowed to traipse along on the honeymoon, but her sadness is soon forgotten when other interests emerge for her. She sees other and real tragedies about her, when the half-brother of her father's understanding Negro cook kills himself and her little cousin dies after a sudden illness. At least, she now belongs to the mysterious, tortured world in which she had felt herself such a stranger. On the surface, there is no more narrative to it than that, but, within such a framework, Miss McCullers constructs a touching picture of youth, loneliness and frustration.

Three People

There are but three main characters in the play, and they are beautifully observed and played, with humor and vividness as well as with compassion. The girl herself is studied with a sensitive understanding that can be amused and deeply sympathetic at the same time, without falling into excessive sentimentality. The old Negro cook is a fully-rounded, richly-detailed portrait of a wise, lonely, indomitable, weary woman, and the little boy is presented in the warmest and most unhackneyed characterization of a child that the stage has seen for many a day. These are real people who give authentic life to a striking play.

As I have said, the three performances are of great help to the work. Ethel Waters, a distinguished actress of stature and quality, gives a performance of remarkable beauty and richness as the Negro woman. Julie Harris, despite a tendency toward monotony, offers a characterization of warmth and loveliness as the twelve-year-old girl, indicating once more that, with a little more experience, she is destined to be one of the important emotional players of her time, while little Brandon de Wilde, a child actor without facile brashness, is a complete and utter joy as the boy. "The Member of the Wedding" is the first important new American play of the season.

New York World-Telegram
The Sun
January 6, 1950

Waters, Harris Roles Spark 'Wedding'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

I have never before heard what happened last night at the curtain calls for "The Member of the Wedding" when hundreds cried out as if with one voice for Ethel Waters and Julie Harris.

The two actresses are splendid beyond compare in this curious play about the tragedy of loneliness. The script itself is richly actable. And the direction is superbly mature, ignoring a thousand possible tricks, playing for values that are heart-rending because they are so universally true.

Anyone who has read Carson McCullers' novel of the same title, which she here dramatized, will not easily forget this story of 12-year-old Frankie Addams, too tall and too awkward, with her cropped head, her calloused elbows and her tough big feet.

Left Out of Everything.

Frankie is in the grip of first maturing, and she feels left out of everything. The neighboring girls have a club, but are a little too old to include her. She does not quite understand about a beau, even for soda or movie purposes. Her father ignores her as an overgrown brat.

Frankie's world is the kitchen, where Bernice, the cook, does her best to tide the youngster over in her unhappiness. There, too, cousin John Henry, aged about six, lives out his own fantasies with his two best friends.

Frankie is highly imaginative, with splendid notions of someday being a "member of the world." The fact that her brother is being married vaguely suggests all the intimate security and warmth she longs for. So she improvises the myth that the couple will take her with them on their honeymoon, and for the rest of their lives. The realization of this idea becomes a fanatical goal, and the play reveals what happens to her.

Universal Feeling.

The terrible unwanted isolation of this child may be only a brief experience of sensitive youngsters, but it has flavors of truth for everyone, no matter how old. Surely everybody must once have felt a little too alien, or a little more independence than he really wanted.

"Member of the Wedding" touches you in an odd way. After laughing out loud for several minutes, you suddenly realize your insides are all contorted with emotion, and as you cut off the hilarity, you suddenly have to blow your nose. If that sounds delicate or hypersensitive, go see it, and watch what happens to you.

Excellent Timing.

Ethel Waters' sense of timing is true as a tide. Lines roll from her lips with such genuine emotion there can never be a false nit to her speech. Her description of her marriages is a masterpiece of comedy and pathos, and when she soothes the two distraught children with an old hymn, only a pinhead could remain unmoved.

Miss Waters' laugh is a trumpet of pure joy.

Julie Harris has great resource, both imaginative and physical, in her portrayal of the 12-year-old girl. She must be fractious, fantastic and ugly, heroic in her own mind, antagonistic and presumptive, utterly unreasonable, and with all of that, always touching. Miss Harris does it with extraordinary success, with lightning changes and inner consistency.

Young Brandon de Wilde as John Henry is a pure treasure. This mite in thick glasses who inherits a doll and thinks freaks are cute, offers several of the plays most uproarious touches, and in the end has left the impression for one of its most moving situations.

With his direction, Harold Clurman is a real hero of the evening. With delicate, touchy, sometimes borderline material, he has never compromised and never used a trick. He indulges in no split second of sentimentality, and it is his stringently masculine control of these essentially feminine situations that give the play its compelling atmosphere.

NEW YORK Herald Tribune

January 6, 1950

= By HOWARD BARNES =

Actors Catch the Bouquet

ETHEL WATERS has returned to Broadway after ten years in a somber and attenuated play about loneliness, "The Member of the Wedding." With her at the Empire is Julie Harris, giving a remarkable performance of a twelve-year-old youngster who wants to join her brother and his bride on their honeymoon. Together they create scenes of poignance, compassion and humor, but Carson McCullers's dramatization of her own novel is a shaky theatrical vehicle. It moves at a snail's pace through two acts in which the literary origin is all too apparent to a final burst of hysterics and melodrama. The acting is the chief virtue of the production.

• • •

The author's central situation is sound enough, but it gathers small momentum and is resolved in a haphazard fashion. A gangling pre-adolescent and a middle-aged Negro mammy with a blue glass eye try to solve their desperate problems and find a world to live in. On the sidelines is a pint-size boy, who frequently contributes comic zest to the action, but is suddenly shuffled into oblivion with an off-stage death from meningitis. There is a certain fascination in the attempts of the trio to seize their small and weighty challenges of destiny. There is an excellent setting by Lester Polakov of a kitchen and garden in a small Georgia town in the fall of 1945. What is wanting is genuine emotional substance.

• • •

Miss Waters is, as always, magnificently assured in the part of the cook who gives counsel to a motherless child. She sings a haunting hymn in addition to holding the drama in something of a focus. It is a difficult assignment, which forces her to reminisce endlessly about a dead husband in one act, but she carries it off triumphantly. Miss Harris is tremendously effective as the kid who wants to get in on a wedding because "we is me," although the part would have been better had a few years been added to it. Her wild schemes for running away from home are beautifully integrated with the volatile shenanigans of a desperately lonesome youngster. Here is acting of a high order.

• • •

Little Brandon De Wilde plays the small fry role with exceptional skill. His timing is always perfect and he reads his lines like a veteran. It is only a pity that he does not remain with his cousin and the cook until the final tragic conclusion of the work, which finds the latter dismissed, after her foster-brother has killed himself. William Hansen is good as the father and James Holden, Janet De Gore, Harry Bolden and Henry Scott are quite right in their bits. Harold Clurman's staging is as laggard as the script until the climax, but it is difficult to see what more he could have done with the material. "The Member of the Wedding" has two brilliant performances, which fully realize what little quality there is in the play itself.

New York

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